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ABSTRACT

The electronic parliamentary library at the European Union (EU) level is developing to meet the needs of a changing political context. It is emerging in multiple forms: cooperation among EU institutions; cooperation among EU parliaments; and the service of the European Parliament itself. The development of electronic service presents a management challenge for libraries, and in the context of the European Parliament there is a challenge to differentiate the library's service in a highly competitive environment. This paper outlines a practical framework for service differentiation. The sections of the paper cover the following topics: (1) context, including the European Parliament, the political context, institutional factors, and managerial issues; (2) information service of the European Parliament, including the Directorate General for Research and Documentation; (3) movement toward a common library of EU institutions, including EUROLIB and an inter-institutional library; (4) movement toward an electronic library for European parliaments; and (5) developing the electronic library of the European Parliament, including differentiating the library and working with communities of practice as a key strategy. (Contains 15 endnotes and 4 references.) (MES)

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Towards the electronic parliamentary library in the context of the European Union

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Abstract:

The electronic parliamentary library at the European Union level is developing to meet the needs of a changing political context. It is emerging in multiple forms: cooperation amongst EU institutions, cooperation amongst EU parliaments, and the service of the European Parliament itself. The development of electronic services presents a management challenge for libraries, and in the context of the European Parliament there is a challenge to differentiate the library's service in a highly competitive environment. A practical framework for service differentiation is outlined. Working with 'communities of practice' is proposed as a key strategy.

1. Introduction

This paper concerns the development of electronic library services for the European Parliament (EP), rather than for all parliaments in the European Union (EU), although it does address the issue of EU wide inter-parliamentary cooperation[2]. It takes 'electronic library' to be synonymous with 'digital' or 'virtual' libraries, meaning broadly a library service offering electronic materials[3].

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2. Context

2.1. The European Parliament

The European Parliament is directly elected by the 370 million citizens of the EU and its role includes participation in the EU legislative process and scrutiny and control of the EU executive. Its origins lie in the 1950's but it became of major significance following the introduction of direct elections (1979) and increased responsibilities brought by subsequent treaties[4]. An 'electronic parliamentary library' is in the course of development in the EP. The context for such a library comprises three main elements: the political context; institutional factors; and managerial issues.

2.2. Political context

The broad political situation facing EU institutions is positive but includes some questioning of their legitimacy[5]. Specific EU issues are compounded by the reduced confidence in politicians and political institutions which seems a global phenomenon. This crisis of legitimacy is being addressed in part through efforts to develop greater 'transparency': making citizens aware of what has been achieved, explaining decisions, increasing accountability and the scope for meaningful participation[6]. There are also efforts to increase legitimacy through improved quality of legislation, with electronic information a key resource and medium for cooperation in the process. Finally, the EU institutions seek legitimacy through improving the efficiency and effectiveness of their operations. For an institution such as the Parliament whose main operations span three sites in three different countries, and whose Members work in fifteen countries, electronic communications are essential. For all these reasons, developing intranet and internet communications have therefore been a priority for the Parliament.

2.3. Institutional factors

The treaties of Amsterdam (1997) and of Nice (2000) have given Parliament a much stronger role in the legislative process: It has also been given an impetus towards even closer relations with national parliaments. Parliament needs to understand national contexts and to draw on national experience in its work. The national parliaments, in turn, may find it helpful to understand both the context of the European legislation and draw on experience in other national arenas. It follows that there is a developing need for EU-wide inter-parliamentary information exchange. This can most effectively and efficiently be supported by electronic media.

The new treaties increased the Parliament's role in legislation through the 'co-decision' procedure. The reforms have also tightened-up legislative procedures with formal deadlines and closer management by all the institutions involved. It has become more important for the Parliament to be informed, and information to the Parliament must be delivered against tight deadlines. Information about Parliament's activities and positions is also of increased interest to the other EU institutions. Again, fast and effective internal and external communication is essential.

2.4. Managerial issues

In institutions with a substantial legacy of traditional library services the development of electronic services can pose problems of transition[7]. In so far as the Parliament offers a traditional library service then it is vulnerable to the 'new economics of information"[8] in which businesses with assets "that traditionally offered competitive advantages and served as barriers to entry will become liabilities" [especially where they involve information content that can be more effectively and efficiently communicated electronically]. In such cases

"the loss of even a small portion of customers to new distribution channels or the migration of a high-margin product to the electronic domain can throw a business with high fixed costs into a downward spiral.
It may be easy to grasp this point intellectually, but it is much harder for managers to act on its implications. In many businesses, the assets in question are integral to a company's core competence. It is not easy psychologically to withdraw from assets so central to a company's identity. It is not easy strategically to downsize assets that have high fixed costs when so many customers still prefer the current business model."[9]

The need for a transition in library resource allocation may not be recognised by clients or other stakeholders, at least in the short term. The 'political' management of the transition is a key management task in the development of the electronic library.

3. Information services of the European Parliament

3.1. Introduction

The Parliament has three information services: one deals with the external audience, another provides day-to-day support to parliamentary committees, and a third provides longer term research and the main library & documentation service. All MEPs have internet access and personal research assistance, and often that provides as much supplementary information as the MEPs require. Many organisations target their information services on the MEPs for lobbying purposes. The various party groups in the Parliament support their own internal information services, and of course national party structures also provide information. Information overload rather than information delivery is seen as the MEPs' problem.

3.2. Directorate General (DG) for Research and Documentation

This DG provides what would be recognised by professional peers as the library, documentation and research service of the Parliament. Its intranet site combines access to research products, external databases, the library catalogue, selected internet links, service information, staff directory etc. In so far as there is an emerging 'electronic library' for the Parliament, then it is this site, but it exists in a competitive and slightly chaotic environment.

4. Towards a common library of EU institutions?

4.1. EUROLIB

There is voluntary cooperation at the practical level between the libraries of EU institutions and related agencies through the EUROLIB organisation[10]. While most of the libraries have distinct subject specialisations and clienteles there are both information sources and processes which are common. In these areas there is scope for sharing information electronically, consortium negotiation and purchasing, sharing expertise and cooperative work. In this practical cooperation it is possible to see an emergent electronic library at the European level, consisting of some common infrastructure and content.

4.2. An inter-institutional library?

Recently, the more ambitious concept of an integrated 'inter-institutional library' has been the subject of a high-level proposal. Current thinking is that this would be a physical library based in Brussels serving the three main institutions (Parliament, Commission and Council of Ministers) but open to the staff of all EU institutions and perhaps, in time, the public. An electronic inter-institutional library could meet some of the basic electronic library requirements of the institutions as a consortium; it may also have some value as an interinstitutional resource which could be accessed by citizens from across the EU[11]. The emphasis on a

physical library in the new proposal underlines the fact that professional thinking on electronic services could be out of step with that of clients - a problem identified by Evans and Wurster.

5. Towards an electronic library for European parliaments?

Information exchange between Parliaments has already been highlighted as an emerging requirement. Following the conclusions of a conference of Speakers of national parliaments in 2000, the ECPRD[12] is elaborating an electronic information service concept. This is intended to facilitate the tracking of EU legislation and the exchange of research and documentation on current national and international issues. A basis for information exchange is being laid by the common use of the Eurovoc thesaurus and the ongoing development of ParlML (based on XML) to structure parliamentary documents. The service will be placed on the ECPRD site as a central place in the European arena: to act as the switching point between parliaments, to make use of work already done at the EU level, and to undertake or collate added-value services such as translation and indexing.

6. Developing the electronic library of the European Parliament

The EP has a profusion of electronic information sources both internal and external. The end result is not wholly positive: it includes information overload, complexity and inefficiency. It underlines the difference between simply providing electronic resources and an 'electronic library'. The elements which make a 'library' distinct are traditional, obvious, ones, even if they take new forms[13].

6.1. Differentiating the library

The key clients we wish to reach have access to good information from other sources - in most cases, too much information and too many alternative sources. On a case-by-case basis these other sources may have advantages in being more specialised, closer to the action, tailored to a political view etc. To succeed in such a competitive and 'noisy' environment, the Parliament's electronic library must offer a package which is clearly differentiated from alternative sources.

The most obvious 'Unique Selling Point' (USP) of parliamentary services should be that they are **non-partisan and dedicated to the primary work of the Parliament**. Other information sources are partisan and/or address multiple audiences. This means for the MEPs that their electronic library should be a safe information source which is uncompromisingly dedicated to their requirements. This is a message that should be pervasive in service communications and in the development of staff.

The service must offer information which is **relevant**. This requires

1. front-line staff getting close to clients and understanding their precise needs, working co-operatively with clients and other information providers
2. 'environmental scanning' at a strategic level to identify emerging/future issues
3. the conversion of such knowledge into information products (produced in-house or identified from external sources)
4. added value by sifting, summarising and analysing information - pre-processing and screening for the client.
5. the minimum of editorial/bureaucratic processing - the link between client knowledge/environmental awareness and content should be as direct as possible.
6. ideally, facilities to allow clients to shape the content and organisation of the service. This can mean in terms of personalised 'views' of selected site elements and/or in terms of clients contributing information and/or in terms of normal user feedback mechanisms.

Currency of information is key and can be achieved through

1. understanding of client requirements and environmental awareness
2. investment in current awareness of staff (the web site itself can be part of this)
3. management commitment to maintaining current information on the site
4. a production system for the web site which allows for rapid publication.

The service must offer **convenience** to clients, which can be delivered through:

1. simplicity of use through design and ease of information retrieval
2. customised or semi-customised access to information
3. rapidity of loading (simplicity of design)
4. ready access to human assistance, hard copy information and referral to specialist services
5. access off-site (i.e. on the Internet or through external access to the network).
6. bringing together of key information sources, directly and through search facilities.

The ultimate objective in this last case could be an integrated search mechanism which allows a single search procedure to produce a unified result from all recommended sources. This appears one of the key issues in developing an electronic library. New electronic information sources and substitutes for labour-intensive in-house indexing and cataloguing can be bought in, but the various sources need to be integrated for clients if they are to offer the same convenience as a traditional library, and if the 'electronic library' is to be distinguishable from the electronic jungle. Integration poses technical problems but also ones which relate to commercial and intellectual property issues e.g. combining access to open sources with access to those with password protection or specific licensing requirements. Interestingly, Akeroyd reports research which suggests that clients may shun what appears the obvious convenience of integrated searching[14].

The service should develop a sense of **ownership** and **community** in its users, through:

1. organising the site to reflect and support existing and potential 'communities of practice' (see section 6.2 below).
2. an active policy of user feedback which results in visible and rapid action.
3. making users visible on the site (e.g. publishing comments, allocating space for 'newsgroup' type features, creating knowledge directories, profiles of interesting users etc.).
4. off-line activities for users, bringing users and staff together

6.2. Communities of practice

The concept of 'communities of practice' is one of the most interesting in the field of knowledge management. Briefly, it is suggested that "collective practice leads to forms of collective knowledge, shared sensemaking, and distributed understanding that doesn't reduce to the content of individual heads....[A community of practice is a] group across which such know-how and sensemaking are shared - [a] group which needs to work together for its dispositional know-how to be put into practice"[15]. The subject-specialised committees of the Parliament can be regarded as the focus for communities of practice extending through the politicians, the committee administrators, experts in the political groups, external experts, in-house researchers, documentalists etc. Equally, such a community might exist at the inter-parliamentary level. The strength of these communities in the EP, and the extent of library/documentation service participation, varies a great deal. Communities of practice in their nature are informal and cannot be constituted by administrative action. However, the facilities of the electronic library can be directed to supporting communications within the group, creating a forum where existing members can easily exchange information and new/potential members can learn and effect an introduction to the community. The attractions of this community forum can be enhanced by using the same facility to provide access to formal knowledge (internet resources, databases, books etc) and to specialist news. Orienting electronic library services to support communities of practice has important benefits:

- the library aligns itself with the core work and key players of the institution, in a practical and visible way. This means that the service is relevant and demonstrates it is relevant.
- the library enhances the operation of the institution, in as far as it enriches the dialogue of its communities and helps to build the communities. (This last is important in a multinational organisation with a relatively transient population).
- library staff can access and be involved in the communities and so can maintain the relevance and visibility of library services in general.

Parliament has sought to support communities of practice through the creation of joint researcher/PDC subject teams, and through the development of new electronic services designed around the subject specialisations of Parliamentary committees. At the inter-parliamentary level the national parliaments, notably through the ECPRD also intend to offer a service which will support actual and potential communities.

7. Conclusion

The EU has perhaps been slow in taking up the idea but the momentum for creating an electronic EU library is now strong. If the electronic library is in its infancy (Akeroyd) then we are conceptually at an earlier stage: will it be twins (parliamentary and inter-institutional) or triplets (add inter-parliamentary)? Will the inter-institutional consume its siblings? It is clear in any event that there are unprecedented opportunities for parliamentary libraries to benefit their parent institutions. These benefits will be based on traditional library skills and virtues such as co-operation, but require a break from the past in terms of resource allocation and the rigorous application of a strategy of differentiation.

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[1] The opinions expressed in this paper are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the European Parliament.

[2] An impression of developments across European was conveyed at the "The electronic library for parliament" seminar held by the European Centre for Parliamentary Research & Documentation in November 2000 (no proceedings published to date). This included a report of a questionnaire completed by 36 European parliaments/assemblies. Electronic services are ubiquitous - 100% had an internet site and 86% an intranet.

[3] For general background on electronic library issues, see article by Akeroyd.

[4] An introduction to the Parliament can be found at http://www.europarl.eu.int/presentation/default_en.htm

[5] Regular polls of EU citizens show a peak in support in 1991 (72%+ thought membership a 'good thing'), and it has fallen fairly steadily since then (to 49% in 2000 - around the level it was in 1981). Amongst 25-39 year olds it has fallen from 75% in 1991 to 50% in 2000, and amongst 15-24 year olds from 73% to 55%. (Eurobarometer, Report No. 35 p. A12 & No. 53 p. 53, p.B12).

[6] See, for example, Article 255 EU Treaty, EP Decision 10.7.97; Council Decision 93/731/CE

[7] See Akeroyd for a practical discussion of some of the issues.

[8] See article by Evans & Wurster.

[9] Evans & Wurster, p. 82.

[10] EUROLIB currently has 21 members, drawn from EU institutions, EU agencies and other organisations which operate at the European level and deal with European information.

[11] The concept of a common electronic library as a support to an existing network of conventional libraries can be seen in the UK with the pilot electronic library of the National Health Service http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/

[12] The European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation is a cooperative body under the aegis of the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, set up in 1977. It is primarily a network of research departments and parliamentary libraries but also involves other officials responsible for information gathering and dissemination. Its aim is to facilitate contacts and exchanges between the officials of member parliaments.

[13] "if we argue that traditional libraries comprise more than just data, if we define them as the sum not only of information sources, but also navigational tools, metadata systems such as catalogues, human support systems and a suitable environment within which information is delivered, then we can say that the digital library is still in its infancy" Akeroyd, p. 1.

[14] Akeroyd, p. 2

[15] Brown & Duguid, p. 8.